

**“ SOME QUESTIONS FOR PRESIDENT ROOSEVELT ” (1 9 3 9)
By Nagai Ryūtarō**

Introduction

Nagai Ryūtarō (1881-1944) was born into an impoverished former samurai family in Kanazawa. After working as a journalist and a professor at Waseda University, Nagai (who was a convert to Christianity) became a politician, serving as a member of the House of Representatives from 1920 to 1944.

Early in his career, Nagai, a member of the more liberal Minseitō (Democratic) Party, had the reputation as a reformer and social activist. In the 1930s, however, reflecting the trends of the nation as a whole, Nagai retreated from his liberal reformist stands and embraced more conservative (some would say reactionary) nationalist and statist positions. Before his death during World War II, Nagai held a number of significant cabinet appointments, including Minister of Colonial Affairs, Minister of Communications, and Minister of Railways.

In this 1939 piece, written in an English-language journal targeted at the international and diplomatic communities, Nagai lays out a justification for Japanese policy toward Asia that was widely accepted in Japan at the time.

Document Excerpts with Questions (Longer selection follows this section)

From *Contemporary Japan*, Volume VIII, Number 5 (July 1939): 563-573.

**“Some Questions for President Roosevelt” (1939)
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The total land area of the earth is estimated at approximately 50 million square miles, of which some 30 million square miles, or three-fifths, is in the hands of only four great Powers, namely, Britain, France, the Soviet Union, and the United States. Moreover, these four great Powers, following the unsuccessful World Economic Conference of 1932, have veered in the direction of closed economies, closing their doors to outside immigration and raising high tariff walls. America has been very deeply concerned with Japanese activity in Asia, but seems to overlook the fact that Japan has had to follow her present policies for a number of reasons among which not the least important is America’s closed door to Asiatic immigration and her closing of markets to Japanese imports. ...

Questions:

1. How does Nagai characterize Japanese policy toward Asia?
2. How does he characterize American foreign policy?

Longer Selection with Questions

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“Some Questions for President Roosevelt” (1939)

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... The world today now faces a great international crisis. This critical condition has developed chiefly from the conflict between those who would maintain the *status quo* and those who would alter it. To be precise, one group is composed of countries which, having followed Imperialism, wish to hold and maintain the lands, material resources, and rights and interests they have conquered or acquired by the pursuit of Imperialism, thus maintaining their present superiority, while the other group is composed of those countries which oppose the bearers of the Imperialist standard and wish to place all lands, material resources, and markets which have been monopolized at the disposal of all mankind, thereby eliminating the causes of friction and conflict between the haves and the have-nots. This latter group aims at the reconstruction of the world upon the basis of international justice and the lofty ideal of co-existence so that the true foundation of a lasting peace may be laid. ...

The total land area of the earth is estimated at approximately 50 million square miles, of which some 30 million square miles, or three-fifths, is in the hands of only four great Powers, namely, Britain, France, the Soviet Union, and the United States. Moreover, these four great Powers, following the unsuccessful World Economic Conference of 1932, have veered in the direction of closed economies, closing their doors to outside immigration and raising high tariff walls. America has been very deeply concerned with Japanese activity in Asia, but seems to overlook the fact that Japan has had to follow her present policies for a number of reasons among which not the least important is America's closed door to Asiatic immigration and her closing of markets to Japanese imports ... all these great Powers have always been imposing their will upon Asia. It is their idea that Asia should not only be for the Asiatics but for all the rest of the world. It is likewise their idea that here in Asia the door should be kept open and opportunity made equal for all peoples. By the same token we have the right to say that all Europe and America are not for their peoples alone but for all peoples of the world and that Europe should therefore keep their doors open and respect the principles of equal opportunity. If the peoples of Europe and America have the right to make their own resources inaccessible to others and construct their own self-sufficient economic structures, then the peoples of Asia have the same freedom to exploit their own natural wealth and establish their own self-sufficiency.

If President Roosevelt is truly anxious, as he seems to be, for the peace of East Asia, why will he not co-operate with Japan and eliminate once and for all the menaces to world peace which have arisen from this one-sided attitude of the Powers? Why does he not keep aloof from Britain, France and the Soviet Union who are trying to checkmate Japan in her fight to free the oppressed races of Asia and thus enable them to reconstruct their life on the spirit of justice and the great principle of love and humanity? Japan is animated by the desire to work with other Powers which will respect the independence of all races in Asia and which will work with these

racess on the principle of equality. With people so disposed, Japan is only too willing to develop the natural wealth of Asia, open up its markets, and construct a new community without oppression or extortion. Japan sincerely believes that it is her duty to build a new Asiatic order in which the peoples of Asia will really enjoy freedom, independence, and peace. ...

Chancellor Bismarck once condemned American diplomacy as “brazen-faced and shameless Monroe Doctrine.” If America means to uphold this doctrine, she should not only expect others to respect it, but she herself should be willing to respect its basic principle. If America were to say that while she would not allow countries other than of the American continents to interfere with American continental affairs, she herself would have the right to interfere not only in the affairs of the American continents, but in any part of the world, she would be adopting an Imperialistic course. Then American diplomacy might be true to Bismarck’s characterization. As it is, however, I am of the opinion that the Monroe Doctrine became untenable, morally at least, in consequence of America’s own actions. The first such action took place in the latter part of the nineteenth century when the United States went forth outside the American continent and thus broke the rule of “Europe by the countries of Europe and America by countries of the American continents.” This happened in 1867 when the American navy took possession of Midway Island which lies some 1,200 miles to the northwest of Hawaii. In 1889, the United States, jointly with Britain and Germany, established a protectorate over the Samoan Islands. The revolutionary outbreak in Hawaii in 1893 furnished the United States with the opportunity to conclude the treaty of annexation with the Hawaiian Government. Then the Philippines and the Island of Guam came under American control as a result of the Spanish War. The last and most complete departure from the Monroe Doctrine was made in 1917, when President Wilson, determined “to make the world safe for democracy,” brought the United States into the World War. By this break with the Monroe Doctrine, America hoped to win a new position in world politics. And now it is evident that President Roosevelt is advancing in the tracks of his predecessor.

Nevertheless, a new age calls for a new policy. I have no intention to take America to task for her attempt to depart from the Monroe Doctrine or for her attempt to construct for herself a new position in world politics. But when America strongly insists on her right to have a voice in some continent other than her own, and yet tries to close the American continents to any people but their own, is this not a most glaring inconsistency?

Questions:

1. How does Nagai characterize Japanese policy toward Asia?
2. How does he characterize American foreign policy?
3. Nagai talks about “a most glaring inconsistency” in American foreign policy. What is that and why is it significant to the case of Japan?
4. Does Nagai believe that America is an imperialist internationally?
5. How would you evaluate Nagai’s arguments, based on your knowledge of Japanese and American history in the years leading to World War II? How would you have responded to Nagai’s assertions as an official with the United States government at the time this piece was written?